

'Music Engagement at mid-life on the Guitar' by Bruce Stewart

Guitar playing as an art form

The skills of an art-form, must be accumulated and practiced over time for the student to make progress (Gavin, 2001)[p53]. The movements required to play a musical instrument are graceful and flowing and therefore practiced and memorised gradually, as one would expect learning a martial art (Coff, 1998)[p4]. There is no secret formula to becoming musical – despite the common notion that there are those who are musical and those who are not (Gavin, 2001)[p54].

With the guitar's popularity as it is, one could be forgiven for assuming that 'basic' guitar skills are easy to achieve. For an elementary level of achievement it may be possible to get away with poor technique but there will be no headroom for improvement – that means that if the student wanted to pursue further skills, they would have to scrap the skills they have, start from scratch and learn new *progressive* skills. This is not a path many in this situation want to take for it means reversing habits. Success with more complex music is impossible without firstly addressing technique issues.

Therefore a casual encounter with the guitar could result in frustration or nothing more than the achievement of certain fundamentals. One could describe guitar playing as 'ballet for the fingers' – there is an *art* to the graceful movements required to play accurately and fluidly. Good guitar technique, the result of gradual improvement over the years, is not difficult to initiate especially if we remain aware that future possibilities depend on it. Therefore technique is an investment – a passport to more complex learning.

Letting go – relaxing body and mind

The task of playing music is not one that calls for the strength associated with everyday life. Indeed it's a task encompassing both body and mind. Like driving a car, there are several tasks to coordinate simultaneously. Likewise, the guitarist's left and right hand have completely different simultaneous tasks. There is a call for great balance and poise for both mind and body – so if a particular area, say, the left hand, takes priority because the technique is not sufficiently developed, then it only stands to reason that another area – perhaps staying in time, ends up taking a 'back seat'. So many of the processes leading to successful playing involve mental imagery, symbolic processes and the willingness to move forward in time with music as it unfolds. As with the successful board rider, there's a need to do more than catch the wave – the 'ride' means negotiating the waves activity as it unfolds in time – the same is true when playing a piece of music.

Balancing the physical and mental

This is the secret of good playing – balancing the chores with the enjoyment and experience of playing. Although the coordination of both mental and physical tasks seems daunting, like the board rider, there comes a time when the chores are done and the overall balance leads to accomplishment. As the board rider commits to a wave, her decision to ride is based upon the size and power of the wave – her movement is entirely determined by the wave. Although playing a piece of music is not as physically compelling as an ocean wave, beginners are reminded that note delivery is time specific- on route corrections are invalid once the timing grid is violated. As the board rider climbs onboard a *moving* wave, so to does the musician begin to play - he can only execute the notes of a melody, as their appointed time arrives, they have their place and cannot be drawn near nor distanced.

Sitting Position

Over the years opinions about sitting positions have changed. Of all the guitar methods I have examined, none gave specific instruction to use a strap – something that most of us associate with standing and playing. For late starters in mid-life, sitting with the guitar can be quite tiring and for those with back complaints, it can be discomfoting. The common sitting position of cradling the guitar on the right leg usually means the neck of the guitar is close to horizontal and as a consequence a distant reach for the left hand – forcing a nasty right angle bend at the wrist.

Although the fashion today among pop musicians [at least on TV], is to *wear* the guitar in-front of the crotch with both arms extended downwards to a horizontal guitar neck, pictures of Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton reveal standing positions with the guitar body in front of the stomach and the guitar neck more towards 45 degrees so that the left forearm is extended *upwards* enabling the hand to open and *spread* over the strings (McDermott, 1995)[p101](Dillon, 1995)[p20].

Creating classical posture using a guitar strap



Although the idea of using a strap when seated sounds unusual, it is the simplest way of keeping the neck raised for the sake of correct left hand posture – without a strap the guitar neck will be closer to horizontal, requiring leaning and bending forward to properly place the left hand fingers – stressing to those with back problems (Berenson and Lister-Sink, 2005)[p1]. To play effectively it's paramount to comfortably reach all the strings while spanning the fingers at their base. This posture, not unlike holding a basketball up side down with one hand, is only

possible when the left forearm, hand and fingers are more or less in the same plane – naturally there will be some bending at the wrist, but if you move your arm towards the floor, you will see that finger spreading becomes impossible.

To maintain the 45degree angle of the guitar neck, attach a strap to the base of the guitar and to the base of the guitar neck – so the guitar will be resting on your right leg, suspended above the left leg by the strap. There are quite a few variations possible but the overall idea of the strap is to lift the fingerboard close to the players shoulder to enable comfortable and accurate left hand finger technique. This position [using a strap] has comfort advantages over the foot-stool-assisted classical sitting position, that in it's self, over long periods, can aggravate back or spinal conditions (Berenson and Lister-Sink, 2005)[p1].

Placement of the Right Arm

Place your right upper forearm on the top surface of the guitar bringing the fingers close to the strings. The arm should now be suspending from the top edge of the guitar body, able to rise from the strings by leaning with the elbow and upper arm onto the top surface. The forearm should therefore be relaxed, capable of swinging from the horizontal position –near the bass strings – through to a vertical position with the hand dropped down close to your right leg. The arc, between these two locations describes the movement of the right hand. The pivot action works because of the fulcrum [top edge of the guitar], separating elbow from lower forearm and hand. Place the forearm onto the top edge of the guitar about six centimetres down from the elbow in such a way that you can rock the hand simply be pushing with the elbow. The swinging action should feel relaxed and free (Denyer, 1982, Shearer, 1963, Taylor, 1978).



Holding a Pick

To play popular guitar it is essential for students to embrace the idea of using a pick [or plectrum]. It is by virtue of the brush-like action of the pick, held gently between the thumb and index finger, that the student will achieve the desired rhythm. The pick functions much like a turntable stylus, which is free to move, due to the cushioning effect of the surrounding material. Similar dynamic results are achieved on the guitar by holding the pick gently [with only a small portion protruding] between the tip-segment of the thumb and side of the index finger. While holding the pick in this manner, swing the forearm through almost ninety degrees, brushing the pick rapidly over the strings. Smooth flowing rhythm, employing this light, brisk pick-stroke, requires much practice and experimentation.

The pick is also vital to the playing of single note melodies and scale passages. The movement required in this situation is similar to the strumming action, with the exception of *resting* the forearm, wrist or fingers on the face of the guitar for greater accuracy. In this resting position, larger wrist movements are still possible – i.e. dropping the thumb from a horizontal position where the pick is touching the string, to a vertical position after striking. The right hand resting position [that is: resting the little finger on the thinner strings for playing bass notes, or conversely resting the base of the palm on the bass strings to strike the thinner strings] is essential for single note playing.



How does one develop Rhythm?

Rhythm is something the player brings to the instrument, not something found in the playing. The instrument is a tool to which we deliver our own actions and intentions. Rhythm is the first port of call for the new late starter – whether it be strumming muted strings or playing a one bar riff – the right hand needs first to experience ‘drumming’.

For too long the focus of guitar playing has been the left hand – where all the notes and chords are being formed. It’s true that the left hand has a major responsibility to prepare notes and chords but the right hand has the task of *continual timely delivery*. It is best to face rhythm problems by getting involved with body response – tapping, hitting or slapping in time with music and then transferring these actions to the guitar - simply strumming on open or muted strings.

Consider the right hand the engine room of your playing. Most engines need to rotate or move in an orderly repetitive manner. Cars move because the gears are accessing a moving motor. As the motorist slows to a halt at traffic lights, the motor is temporarily disengaged. The motor, regardless of the movement of the car is continually moving. Likewise the right hand can be in-and-out of gear – strum across the face of your guitar above the strings and occasionally lower your pick to make intermittent contact. Just because there is no sound, doesn’t mean there is no rhythm. Try striking the strings once every four beats - this will demonstrate that even periodical strums can be played equidistant, through continuous arm movement.

Bibliography

- Berenson, G. and Lister-Sink, B. (2005) *The American Music Teacher*, **54**, 18, 6pgs.
- Coff, R. (1998) *MusicStaff.com*.
- Denyer, R. (1982) *The Guitar Handbook*, Pan Books Limited, London.
- Dillon, S. C. (1995) In *Faculty of Social Sciences* La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria, pp. 79.
- Gavin, H. (2001) *Music Education Research*, **3**, 51, 11p.
- McDermott, J. (1995) *Jimi Hendrix Sessions: The Complete Studio Recording Sessions 1963-70.*, Little, Brown & Company, London.
- Shearer, A. (1963) *Classic Guitar Technique Vol. 1*, Franco Colombo, Inc., New York.
- Taylor, J. (1978) *Tone Production on the Classical Guitar*, Musical New Services Ltd., London.